

Sarah Furnace
1 Mile S of Sproul on Old US 220
Sproul Vicinity
Blair County
Pennsylvania

HAER No. PA-180

HAER
PA
7-SPROU, V,
1-

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

HAER
PA,
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SARAH FURNACE

HAER No. PA-180

Location: One mile south of Sproul on old US 220, Sproul Vicinity, Blair County, Pennsylvania

USGS Quad: Roaring Spring, Pennsylvania (1:24000)
UTM: 17 E.715920 N.4459990

Date of Construction: 1831-32

Builder: Dr. Peter Shoenberger

Present Owner: Unknown

Present Use: Abandoned

Significance: Initially developed by the Shoenbergers, a prominent iron-producing family in the region, the furnace was one of the county's leading producers of pig iron between 1849 and 1856. Nothing survives from the blast furnace; however, the Grist Mill that was part of the iron plantation remains intact (HAER No. PA-180-A).

Project Information: In February 1987, the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) and the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) began a multi-year historical and architectural documentation project in southwestern Pennsylvania. Carried out in conjunction with America's Industrial Heritage Project (AIHP), HAER undertook a comprehensive inventory of Blair and Cambria counties as the first step in identifying the region's surviving historic engineering works and industrial resources.

The results of this project have been published in Blair County and Cambria County, Pennsylvania: An Inventory of Historic Engineering and Industrial Sites (1990), edited by Gray Fitzsimons and produced by HABS/HAER for the National Park Service.

Compiler: Nancy Shedd and Ken Heineman, Historians
Gray Fitzsimons and Kenneth Rose, Editors

History:

From the early 1800s through the 1850s the Juniata Valley's ironmasters produced largely charcoal iron. In Blair County, eight of the thirteen blast furnaces operating in 1856 produced charcoal iron. By this time, however, charcoal iron production was on the decline and a number of ironmasters were importing anthracite coal or using coke. To the west, in the rugged Alleghenies of Cambria County, where the iron industry was not developed until the 1840s, most of the ante-bell. m blast furnaces were fueled using locally mined bituminous coal and coke, instead of charcoal. In fact, by the mid 1850s, of the seven blast furnaces operating in the county, only one produced charcoal iron.

During the first three decades of the nineteenth century, when Blair County was part of Huntingdon County, iron works were developed along two branches of the Juniata, the Little Juniata River and the Frankstown Branch of the Juniata, as well as tributaries to these streams. The earliest iron works in what became Blair County was the Lower Tyrone Forge, established about 1805 on the Little Juniata River, near Tyrone. This forge used pig iron produced at Huntingdon Furnace, some fifteen miles to the east. About two years later John Royer built a second works, named Cove Forge. Located at the confluence of the Little Juniata and the Frankstown Branch of the Juniata, Cove Forge handled pig iron produced at nearby Etna Furnace, the county's first blast furnace. Etna Furnace was subsequently expanded by the Spang family; its owners constructed a blacksmith shop, an ironmaster's house, a company store, a barn, and a grist mill, all of stone. Much of the iron produced at Etna Furnace was shipped to Pittsburgh, where in 1828 Henry Spang established a rolling mill, north of the city.¹

The Spangs were not the only prominent iron-producing family in the region. The Schoenberger family, originally of Petersburg, in Huntingdon County, also grew in stature as Dr. Peter Shoenberger expanded his father's holdings in the Juniata Valley after 1815. In addition to establishing several furnaces, forges, and mines east of the Alleghenies, Dr. Shoenberger built a rolling mill in Pittsburgh in the mid 1820s. The family's holdings in the region remained considerable through at least the 1850s. The culmination of Dr. Shoenberger's involvement in the iron business occurred in 1852 when he served as one of the founders of Cambria Iron Company in Johnstown. Although by the late 1850s the Cambria rail mill was one of the largest in the nation, Shoenberger failed to reap any of its riches as he withdrew from the enterprise after it went into the hands of a receiver in 1854.²

Despite failure in the Cambria Iron venture, the Shoenberger name remains associated with a number of successful iron works in the Juniata Valley. In 1832, Dr. Shoenberger established Sarah Furnace in Greenfield Township, the southernmost limit of Blair County. Ore for the furnace was brought from the nearby Bloomfield mines, also controlled by the Shoenbergers. A water-powered bellows originally furnished the cold blast and was maintained until 1847 when two iron tubs were installed. At this time the charcoal iron produced at Sarah Furnace was shipped to the three Maria Forges, one of which was another Shoenberger enterprise and stood near Hollidaysburg. In addition to Sarah Furnace, George Schoenberger's heirs owned one other iron works in Blair County. This was Martha Furnace, also known as Gap Furnace, located near McKee in Freedom Township.³

¹ George Wolf, Blair County's First Hundred Years: 1846-1946, (Hollidaysburg: Blair County Historical Society, 1948); J. P. Lesley, American Iron Association Bulletin, 1886 (Philadelphia: 1887), p. 151.

² One of the few sources available on the Shoenberger family is Calvin W. Hetrick's The Iron King: The Story Dr. Peter Shoenberger, Early Ironmaster of Central Pennsylvania--His Industrial Empire, His Family, His Times (Martinsburg, Pennsylvania: Morrisons Cove Herald, 1961).

³ Despite the pronouncement of Sharp and Thomas (pp. 22-23) that Sarah Furnace was a failure and "shut down after two or three years of operation," J. P. Lesley's American Iron Association Bulletin, 1886 (p. 87) indicates that the furnace was one of the county's leading producers of pig iron between 1849 and 1856. At this time Sarah Furnace was leased by David C. McCormick of Hollidaysburg.